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**ENDING ZAIRE'S 'ETERNAL CRISIS' AND  
POSITIONING FOR ADVANTAGE FROM MOBUTU'S FALL**

***"S'il y a l'anarchie, profitez-en"\****

\* "If there's anarchy, take advantage of it"  
(Expression among Zairian university students<sup>1</sup>)

Glyn Davies  
Seminar A  
Amb. Mack/Dr. Reichart  
February 17, 1995

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<sup>1</sup> Sandra W. Meditz, Ed, Zaire - A Country Study (Washington, D.C.: Dept. of the Army Area Handbook, 4th Ed., 1994) 107.

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## INTRODUCTION

The words "crisis" and "chaos" have been so closely associated with central African giant Zaire for so long that they form part of the country's informal appellation. The literature about Zaire, from V.S. Naipul's 1981 book, A New King for the Congo: Mobutu and the Nihilism of Africa to Michael Schatzberg's 1991 tract, Mobutu or Chaos is the literature of despair and despondency. So many observers, in fact, have been writing in increasingly alarming terms of the Zairian tragedy for so long that it is all but impossible to find a positive assessment of the country's prospects. But Zaire is too important for Africa's future -- and, in the long term, given its size, riches and population, for the world's future -- for us to fail to make the necessary intellectual and economic investment now to ensure a stable, prosperous future for the country. What is more, it is the contention of this paper that the power or powers which move to take up Zaire's cause stand to gain a great deal: a favored economic and strategic position in Africa's richly endowed center, and the sort of sense of humanitarian accomplishment that all modern democratic powers appear to crave.

What has led to Zaire's present tragedy? What is the shape and scope of the challenge facing Zaire today? What is at stake for America, the industrial world and Africa itself in that country? And, finally, what, if anything, can be done to salvage order, the prospect of relative prosperity, and the promise of

eventual democracy for Zaire?

This paper will, first, limn Zaire's post-colonial history to lay a foundation for, second, a description of the depths to which the country has sunk today. Third, it will attempt to describe what is at stake in Zaire's accelerating descent into chaos -- or, put positively, what might be gained if we forthrightly take on the Zairian challenge. Finally, some prescriptions will be advanced for meeting the challenge. The outline of a long-term, proactive policy -- now lacking -- will be advanced.

#### I. Zaire's Post-colonial History: Descent into Chaos

In the beginning of the Zairian state as now, perhaps fittingly, there was chaos. After bloody pro-independence riots in the late 1950's Belgium, second only to Portugal for the brutality and mindless rapaciousness of its colonial administration, decided to abandon the Congo in January of 1959. It left the fledgling Congo few tools to govern itself. There were, illustratively, perhaps only a dozen university-educated Congolese to form the core of the new country's parliament.<sup>2</sup> With barely 18 months between the decision in Brussels to let the Congo go and formal independence on June 30, 1960, it was small wonder the first five years of the country's existence were characterized by army mutinies, secession by the country's two most developed provinces,

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<sup>2</sup> Sandra W. Meditz, Zaire - A Country Study. (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army Area Handbook, 4th Edition, 1994) 29.

convulsive changes in government (and political assassinations, recall Lumumba's death in January, 1961, possibly with U.S. connivance<sup>3</sup>), further regional rebellion and uprising, all capped by Joseph Desire Mobutu's successful coup in November of 1965.

The next dozen or so years were dominated by Mobutu's consolidation of power in an increasingly repressive, corrupt rule and his institution of "Zairianization," whereby he "Africanized" everything he could touch, from the names of the country and its principal river to those of all born within its borders (by law all Zairians were required to adopt African names). With this step he may have performed his only unalloyed service to his country, because it did spawn an identification of the individual with the nation which has persisted to this day.

Mobutu, now undisputed master (despite the patina of democracy he applied to the Zairian polity), also embarked on a disastrous nationalization of the country's major mining and industrial concerns, a step later partially reversed but from which Zaire has never recovered. Its principal effect: Mobutu could, with impunity, begin amassing the \$5 billion-plus personal fortune which has made him one of the world's wealthiest men.<sup>4</sup>

The next dozen years -- until 1990 or so -- were particularly turbulent and dismaying. Repeated rebel invasions of the mineral-

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<sup>3</sup> Madeleine G. Kalb, The Congo Cables, (New York: Macmillan, 1982), 149-152, 158-159.

<sup>4</sup> Winsome J. Leslie, Zaire: Continuity and Political Change in an Oppressive State. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993) 36-37.

rich southern Shaba province could only be put down with Western help. The international prices of primary commodities, principally copper, rubber, diamonds, cobalt and coffee, fell through the floor, destroying Zaire's export earnings, garnering it pauper status in both the Paris and London Clubs and smothering any hope the country might retain -- much less further develop, its decaying infrastructure. By the mid-1980's, for instance, it was no longer possible to cross the country by motor vehicle, the road system the Belgian colonial administration had so brutally built having too greatly decayed.<sup>5</sup> In 1983, furthermore, Zaire was discovered to be the epicenter of the world's AIDS epidemic. Little has been done to combat the disease as the state-run health care system has collapsed, putting most clinics and blood banks out of business. By the end of the 1980's Zaire was no longer self-sufficient in food and Mobutu seldom came to Kinshasa, the capital, preferring to spend his time in his remote home village of Gbadolite, or abroad.

## II. The Present: Paralysis

And then things really got bad. After 1990 the Cold War's end removed any incentive for the West to prop up Mobutu. Zaire's civil service, most schools, phone system and the mining sector literally ceased to function. The Washington Post, in its series on Africa, classed Zaire with just Somalia and Liberia among sub-Saharan Africa's 45 states as a "country without a working

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<sup>5</sup> Meditz, supra note 2 at 138.

government."<sup>6</sup> Former Assistant Secretary for African Affairs Herman Cohen told the House Subcommittee on Africa in October of 1993 that, "to say that Zaire has a government today would be a gross exaggeration."<sup>7</sup> Hyperinflation and growing malnutrition were among the first indices of the near-total breakdown in Zaire's economic sector.<sup>8</sup> America all but pulled out, closing its AID mission, refusing to send an ambassador, banning (along with Belgium and France) Mobutu and his family from obtaining visas and otherwise isolating the dictator's decrepit, democracy-resistant regime. Moubata declared a multiparty "Third Republic," but reneged soon after on his promise of reform. Interethnic violence flared in the South and East, displacing an estimated half-million people.<sup>9</sup> Zaire ceased publishing a budget, international lending halted, Europeans left in droves, and Zairians themselves 'voted with their feet,' fleeing by the thousands to remote jungle locations to escape the depredations of unpaid officials.

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<sup>6</sup> The Washington Post, July 10, 1994, A1, A24-25.

<sup>7</sup> Herman J. Cohen, Consultant, the Global Coalition for Africa, in testimony before the Subcommittee on Africa of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives hearing on *Zaire: A Country in Crisis*, October 26, 1993.

<sup>8</sup> George E. Moose, Assistant Secretary of State for Africa, Testimony before the Subcommittee on Africa, U.S. House of Representatives, October 26, 1993.

<sup>9</sup> "U.S. Policy Toward Zaire," undated fact sheet written by the Zaire Desk, Office of Central African Affairs, Bureau of African Affairs, U.S. Department of State.

### III. Zaire Matters

At a time of international retrenchment and domestic introspection for the United States, does it make sense for us to spare a thought, much less a dime, for Zaire? It does, emphatically. There are both negative and positive reasons why we must abandon our growing apathy toward our former African client.

On the negative side of the ledger, much is at stake in Zaire's future. Zaire is geostrategically important. The second largest country in sub-Saharan Africa, it shares a border with more states (nine) than any other nation on the continent and has a population greater than all but Nigeria in the region (at over 40 million people, it has 10 million more than the Republic of South Africa). In recent years, trouble on Zaire's borders with Rwanda and Angola has gained international attention.<sup>10</sup> Though a Somalia-like famine is unlikely given the country's still-rich natural endowment in food and game, large-scale political or ethnic strife within Zaire could result in tragedy dwarfing the recent troubles in Somalia and Rwanda. Ominously, segments of Kinshasa's 4-5 million people are convulsing in civil unrest more and more frequently and disease such as the current rural epidemic of sleeping sickness could flare into a regional scourge.

On the positive side of the ledger and of greater long-term interest to the continent and, beyond it, to those of us in the industrialized world, is Zaire's immense endowment in natural

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<sup>10</sup> Meditz, supra note 2 at xxxv.

resources. Even far short of full exploitation, Zaire has been the world's largest producer of the strategic metal cobalt, second or third producer of industrial diamonds (it may have as much as 80% of the world's known reserves), and fifth largest producer of copper (perhaps the richest copper ore in the world is found in Zaire). Zinc, manganese, gold, uranium and other important metals occur in abundance there. Zaire's hydroelectric (only the Amazon is more powerful than the Zaire river) and agricultural potential (its vast forest alone, virtually unexploited commercially, is the world's second largest) are believed sufficient to power and feed all of Africa.<sup>11</sup>

Given Africa's grinding poverty and currently dim economic prospects, can we afford, therefore, to let Zaire's riches, its potential, its people, lie fallow? If the Zairian polity continues sinking, eventually to splinter in conflict among its 200 ethnic groups when Mobutu loses his grip or dies, how will that affect Africa? What sort of humanitarian demands and population pressures will a completely anarchic Zaire, quarantined by the West, generate internally or radiate outward?

It is possible, of course, that Zaire will simply continue its devolutional slide toward non-nationhood without affecting or attracting undue attention in the West. Then the tragedy of Zaire's decline will be merely that of a lost opportunity, of the squandered potential of a vast and rich land and its people. More

likely, though, is a scenario in which the West -- and principally the United States, whose power, reach and intimate historical role in Zaire will mark it for responsibility -- will be called upon to deal with a series of crises not unlike those which wracked the country at independence.

#### IV. Being Proactive in Zaire Could Pay Off

Given Zaire's dismal post-colonial history and its abysmal -- even apocalyptic -- near-term prospects, few can fault the small, hardy band of Zaire watchers their unanimity of despair about prospects for a successful Western or U.S. approach towards the country. Amnesty International, in a recent statement to the Congress by its Acting Director, echoed other commentators when it spoke darkly of a "deepening political, human rights [and] social crisis" in the country<sup>12</sup> which the U.S. could only affect at the margins. Michael Schatzberg, one of the closest and most respected observers of the Zairian scene, called in 1991 for a cessation of U.S. support for Mobutu and pressure on him to retire as an "elder statesman." Should Mobutu not respond to such pressure, Schatzberg prescribes we do "nothing."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Oral Statement of Amnesty International USA Acting Director Mr. Curt Goering on Zaire: "A Country in Crisis" before the House Foreign Affairs Committee's Subcommittee on African Affairs, October 26, 1993.

<sup>13</sup> Michael G. Schatzberg, Mobutu or Chaos?: The United States and Zaire, 1960-1980. (Lanham: University Press of America, 1991) 109.

And yet it is the thesis of this paper that there is much to be gained by actively addressing, now, the question of Zaire's future. If Zaire can be redeemed, we forestall future political, ethnic and humanitarian crises, send a strong message of hope to the entire continent and, not incidentally, position ourselves to share with Zaire's people in the long-term economic payoff now latent in the country's natural riches and human potential.

*How do we accomplish such a daunting undertaking?*

**First, we resolve to make engagement in Zaire a central pillar of our policy in sub-Saharan Africa.** We convene meetings of Western powers with interests in the region, principally France and Belgium, to discuss next steps. We take up Zaire's case vigorously with South Africa, with the OAU and with the United Nations. We sell this new emphasis to the Congress and the American people by explaining that, with South Africa's successful emergence from Apartheid, the next challenge is to reverse Africa's economic and humanitarian slide by working first with populous, potentially rich Zaire at the continent's center. We explain the geostrategic, historical and moral bases of our policy.

**Second, we convey our resolve to see positive change in Zaire to the Zairian people, to the political opposition and to Mobutu.** We arrange an ambitious public and private "rescue fund" for the country conditioned on Mobutu's departure, Zaire's continued territorial integrity, the holding of free and fair elections, concessions on favorable terms to develop Zaire's hydroelectric and

mineral potential, and a robust, non-military United Nations presence in the country.

**Third, we do not take "no" for an answer from Mobutu.** Rather than merely quarantining the Zairian dictator and his family via visa restrictions, we track down and freeze all of his overseas holdings and, should it become necessary, lead an international coalition to force him to step down. The recent Haiti precedent may prove useful in this regard.

**Fourth, after Mobutu's departure, we put in place under UN auspices an extensive plan for Zaire's economic and political development, perhaps asking South Africa to take the political lead in the country as a sort of "trustee."** An appropriate beginning would be to reactivate the copper and cobalt mines in Shaba province with capital from a public/private consortium. A robust authority to control central Zaire's diamond fields and stanch the smuggling of diamonds should be put in place. Infrastructural projects might be next, including revitalizing Zaire's decrepit rail and road services. In conjunction with these essentially economic moves, we work to convert the sham "democratic" institutions created by Mobutu into real instruments for Zaire's democratization. The Peace Corps, once 200-strong in Zaire, could play an important role in the democratization campaign, as could NGOs such as the National Democratic Institute and its Republican counterpart. .

### Conclusion: A Commitment to Zaire Could Conquer Apathy

Washington is afflicted with much hand-wringing about the waves of "chaos" predicted to crest in the worst-off corners of the Third World. Robert Kaplan, in his widely read 1994 article *The Coming Anarchy* predicts Africa will be hardest hit. Interestingly, he draws his African examples primarily from West Africa, a region of the continent relatively less "chaotic" than Zaire. If, as Kaplan argues in the final two paragraphs of his article, "the borders ... separating West Africa from the outside world are in various ways becoming more impenetrable," those dividing Zaire from the world are becoming, partly with the West's connivance, hermetically sealed. We should heed Kaplan's warning that "we ignore this dying region at our own risk."<sup>14</sup>

Given American resolve, a robust U.S. and multinational commitment, and sufficient publicly guaranteed private investment, Zaire can be made to work -- and thus become a bulwark against anarchy and a first step towards Africa's rehabilitation -- in the space of a generation. The country is not ungovernable and the people are hard-working. What is more, the country offers to those who invest in it a tremendous potential return, and it is on that basis that Americans, in their present reluctant frame of mind, might be made to welcome an engagement in Zaire.

Where once we gave substantial aid and support to Mobutu to

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<sup>14</sup> Robert D. Kaplan, *The Coming Anarchy*. (The Atlantic Monthly, February, 1994) 76.

prevent Soviet gains in Africa, we should now invest our time and money in his country, to roll back chaos. The United States, with a relatively modest commitment of wealth and compassion, stands to achieve a diplomatic, economic and humanitarian hat-trick in the heart of Africa, if only it will get in the game.

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